

Pots de crème with rhubarb

I was inspired to make this by a vanilla panna cotta with rhubarb which I enjoyed at Cotto, by far the best restaurant in Cambridge. Rhubarb has just hit Cambridge market, so I wasn't surprised to find it on the menu at Cotto, which makes a point of using local, organic and seasonal produce. Not wanting to get involved with gelatin this particular afternoon, I changed it to pots de crème. They were easy, beautiful and delicious.



Serves: 4

Total preparation time: 45 mins

Total cooking time: 45 mins

For the pots de crème:

475 ml (2 cups) double cream

4 tbsps sugar

small pinch of salt

a vanilla pod

6 large egg yolks

For the rhubarb compôte:

zest of half an orange

8 tbsps sugar, divided

350g bright pink-red young rhubarb (about 4 long stems)

6 tbsps water

1. Make sure you have 4 little pots (ramekins are fine) that each hold 110ml (4 fl oz) while still leaving ½" of space at the top. Find a roasting tin / gratin dish which has sides as high as the ramekins. Line this with a folded tea towel. Place ramekins on top and set aside.
2. Preheat oven to 150C (300F), with a rack in the middle.
3. Put cream, sugar and salt in a saucepan. Split vanilla pod along its length and scrape seeds into cream. Add pod to pan as well. Heat slowly, stirring occasionally, until small bubbles appear around edge and it nearly boils.
4. Meanwhile whisk yolks for a couple of minutes, until pale and creamy.
5. Bit by bit, and very slowly at first, add hot cream to yolks, whisking continually. If you add too much too fast you will curdle the yolks.

6. Rinse out saucepan. Pour custard mixture back into pan through a fine sieve so as to remove vanilla pod and *chalazae* (little stringy bits that hold the egg yolk in place inside the egg).
7. Pour custard into ramekins. Do not fill them to the brim – leave a gap of ½” at the top. Place a square of parchment paper over the ramekins, then cover entire dish with foil. Loosely seal around the edges, leaving one corner unsealed and open. Boil a kettle.
8. Transfer dish to oven and pour boiling water in through the open corner until half-way up sides of ramekins. Seal corner of foil. Bake for 30 mins.
9. After 30 mins carefully remove dish without slopping water into the ramekins to check if pots de crème are ready: They should be set round the edges but still jiggle like a jelly in the middle when nudged. They may need a few more minutes, but be careful not to over-cook.
10. Remove ramekins from their bath and let cool. Then transfer to fridge and chill for at least a couple of hours before eating.
11. Meanwhile make rhubarb compôte: First pare zest off half an orange (avoiding the bitter white pith) and cut into very thin 1” long julienne. Put these in a small pan, submerge in water, heat and boil for 5 or so mins. Drain and repeat. Drain and repeat for a third time, this time adding 4 tbsps sugar to the pan as well. Drain and set aside.
12. Wash rhubarb and slice into 1” pieces, on an angle to look pretty. Place in a large pan, so that they form a single layer covering the pan’s base. Sprinkle 4 tbsps sugar, half the orange zest and the water evenly over rhubarb. Cover and cook over a very low heat until totally tender. Avoid stirring so that they retain their shape. Let cool completely in the pan.
13. To assemble: Spoon rhubarb and some of its syrupy juices on top of each pot de crème. Garnish with a few strips of orange zest.

Notes and variations:

- You will know if you have perfectly cooked your pots de crème when you try one – it should be set throughout and silky smooth in consistency. If there are little bubbles, you have over-cooked it.
- If you must, for a lighter version substitute some/all of the cream with milk.
- If you don’t have a vanilla pod, use approx ½ tsp vanilla extract instead, adding it when you combine the hot cream and yolks.
- This is a great dessert to make in advance. You can make both the pots de crème and the rhubarb compôte the day before and store in the fridge, covered. Bring fruit to room temperature and pots de crème to just below room temperature before serving.
- Of course, you could serve any stewed or fresh fruit on top instead of rhubarb. A little crunchy biscuit or wafer on the side would also be nice.

